

RACE, IDEOLOGY, AND CULTURE IN CUBA: Recent Scholarship

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- BETWEEN RACE AND EMPIRE: AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND CUBANS BEFORE THE CUBAN REVOLUTION.* Edited by Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1998. Pp. 298. \$59.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)
- EL FANTASMA DE LA ESCLAVITUD: PREJUICIOS RACIALES EN CUBA Y AMERICA LATINA.* By Rafael Duharte and Elsa Santos. (Bonn, Germany: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1997. Pp. 159.)
- EL DIRECTORIO CENTRAL DE LAS SOCIEDADES NEGRAS DE CUBA, 1886–1894.* By Oilda Hevia Lanier. (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1996. Pp. 67.)
- SOCIEDADES DE INSTRUCCION Y RECREO DE PARDOS Y MORENOS QUE EXISTIERON EN CUBA COLONIAL.* By Carmen V. Montejo Arrechea. (Veracruz, Mex.: Instituto Veracruzano de Cultura, 1993. Pp. 138.)
- NATIONALIZING BLACKNESS: AFROCUBANISMO AND ARTISTIC REVOLUTION IN HAVANA, 1920–1940.* By Robin Moore. (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997. Pp. 320. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)
- MEDICINA Y RACISMO EN CUBA: LA CIENCIA ANTE LA INMIGRACION CANARIA EN EL SIGLO XX.* By Consuelo Naranjo Orovio and Armando García González. (La Laguna, W. Canary Is.: Taller de Historia, 1996. Pp. 205.)
- RACISMO E INMIGRACION EN CUBA EN EL SIGLO XIX.* By Consuelo Naranjo Orovio and Armando García González. (Aranjuez, Spain: Doce Calles, 1996. Pp. 236.)

Not that long ago, Jorge Domínguez observed that race had been a “classic ‘non-topic’” in Cuban history (1988, ix). Indeed, more has been written about race and racism in Cuba during the last ten years than in the three previous decades combined. We are witnessing a sort of scholarly boom in publications on Cuban history and society in general and questions of race, identities, racism, ideology, and nationhood in particular.

This sudden interest in Cuba’s postcolonial race relations can be described, following Howard Winant’s characterization of similar developments in the United States, as “something of an event” (1994, 7), an indica-

tion that in Cuba (as elsewhere), ideas of race continue to influence social and interpersonal relations in myriad ways. What is new is not the reality that race remains ingrained in the Cuban social fabric but the burgeoning of scholarly interest in the subject. What accounts for this sudden burst of scholarly production on what was previously a "non-topic"?

I suspect that the Cuban crisis of the 1990s underlies this new trend. The collapse of the economy under the so-called special period in the early 1990s proved that even three decades after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Cuba remained heavily dependent on a single export product and a single market for survival. Things had not changed that much after all. Prerevolutionary social problems once thought to have been totally eliminated reappeared: prostitution flourished in the new tourist economy; income disparities widened; social inequalities increased; crime began to rise. Foreign corporations long absent from the island reasserted their presence. Giant posters that used to proclaim revolutionary slogans gave way to ads for United Colors of Benetton.

So it happened with race. Cuban authorities had claimed since the early 1960s that racial discrimination had been eliminated from the island. Although they acknowledged that racist stereotypes and prejudices had not been wiped out, the dominant discourse explained them as "remnants" of the capitalist past that would disappear in due course. Moreover, such cultural and ideological remnants were supposedly restricted to individuals' heads, having little or no impact on social relations beyond the immediate private sphere. Although these claims were not totally without foundation, they grossly overestimated the impact of structural transformations while dismissing ideology as a passive "superstructural" reflection of the "economic base." Such an environment inevitably discouraged scholarly research on race and racism and even public discussion of the topic. As the late Afro-Cuban scholar and activist Pedro Serviat asserted, Cuba had "solved" the racial problem (1986). Thus there was no real problem to investigate.

The special period challenged these perceptions. Race had not disappeared as a meaningful variable from the Cuban social landscape, and ideas of race continued to shape social perceptions about different groups, their capacities, intelligence, beauty, and morality. In the tense environment of the 1990s, such ideas restricted the access of individuals categorized as black or mulatto to jobs in the most desirable sectors of the economy, such as tourism. By the mid-1990s, it had become increasingly difficult to argue that Cuba was the racial paradise that Cuban authorities and sympathetic observers once claimed. Like other forms of social inequality, racial disparities and racially defined tensions actually increased during "the special period."

Scholars in Cuba and abroad have reacted to this changing environment by conducting research on issues that were previously neglected. A

research group from the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas, for instance, conducted a study among the so-called *jineteras* (prostitutes) in 1994. Other scholars in Cuba (Díaz et al. 1996) and abroad (Davidson 1996; Fernández 1997) have also studied the reemergence of prostitution under the new tourist-oriented dollar economy. The Centro de Antropología de Cuba (now subordinated to the Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnología y Medio Ambiente) defined racial issues as one of its research priorities in the early 1990s. Its members have conducted valuable field research in several neighborhoods in Havana to assess the impact of the crisis on race relations and the persistence of racial stereotypes and prejudices in the Cuban social consciousness (Alvarado 1996, 1998; Serrano 1998). Similar concerns have informed research published by other scholars (de la Fuente and Glasco 1997; de la Fuente 1998; Fernández 1996; Caño 1996; Guancho 1998; Pérez-Sarduy 1998). Meanwhile, panels devoted to analyzing contemporary racial problems in Cuba have proliferated at national and international conferences. The popular media in Cuba have also published a few pieces on the subject (Gutiérrez 1997; Mexidor 1999).

This context may be useful for analyzing the growing literature on race and racism in Cuba. The connection is particularly evident in the case of *El fantasma de la esclavitud: Prejuicios raciales en Cuba y América Latina*, a valuable work by historians Rafael Duarte and Elsa Santos from Casa del Caribe in Santiago de Cuba. The first part of the book surveys racism and racial prejudice in several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, based on a limited number of secondary sources. The second part is what most readers will find extremely revealing and useful. It reproduces the "testimonies" of seventy-eight men and women of different racial and social backgrounds (mainly students and professionals or white-collar employees) interviewed by the authors in 1994 and 1995. These candid testimonies provide a unique inventory of the vast repertoire of racist proverbs and expressions that permeate Cuban popular culture and language. They also suggest that whiteness continues to be regarded as the normative ideal of beauty, education, and social mobility and that many Cubans continue to be obsessed with "improving" the race of their descendants through unions with lighter partners. Black or mulatto women who give birth to light-skinned children are said to have "good wombs," whereas those whose offspring are darker are defined as having "bad wombs." As might be expected, many of the white informants were particularly opposed to interracial unions and rejected the entrance of individuals deemed black or mulatto into their families.

Duarte and Santos explain these ideas as lingering notions from the era of slavery that operate at "the level of individual consciousness" (p. 77), hence the title of the book. "Cuban culture," they explain, "crystalized in the midst of a society marked by slavery. Barely a century after abolition, it is logical that racial prejudices survive among Cubans, white and black" (p. 77).

Although Duharte and Santos are critical of the official position that deems racism “a remnant of the past” (p. 76), in asserting that current racial ideologies are holdovers from the slavery period, they end up reproducing the same dominant discourse that they criticize. Slavery and historical legacies do count, but a vast body of scholarship has convincingly challenged the idea that the nature of slave regimes predetermined the character and outcome of racial orders after abolition. While Duharte and Santos’s interpretation may not add significantly to scholarly understanding of how and why racial ideas have persisted in post-revolutionary Cuba, they have provided an invaluable research tool that will be of great use to many other students of race and racism and may generate further discussion of these issues.

The ideological and cultural foundations of what Duharte and Santos deem “survivals” constitute the subject of *Racismo e inmigración en Cuba en el siglo XIX* and *Medicina y racismo en Cuba: La ciencia ante la inmigración canaria en el siglo XX*, both coauthored by Consuelo Naranjo Orovio and Armando García González. These two books deal with similar questions but cover different periods. Whereas *Racismo e inmigración* refers to the nineteenth century (mainly 1800 to the 1870s), *Medicina y racismo* deals with the first Cuban Republic (1902–1933). The two works can be read consecutively, with the one on the twentieth century as a kind of continuation of that on the nineteenth.

Both books reproduce and analyze the debates waged by Cuba’s most prominent scientists and scientific societies and institutions over questions of race. Like scientists elsewhere in the North Atlantic world, Cuban biologists, physicians, and anthropologists were deeply concerned about the racial makeup of the island’s population. They debated the influences that climatic conditions might have on racial groups and opposed the immigration of groups considered nonwhite. These books make a significant contribution to the study of race and racism in Cuba and to the history of scientific ideas in the island. First, the formation of scientific discourses of race in Cuba has not been studied systematically before, with only a few exceptions (Stepan 1991; Pruna and García 1989). Second, the two books are based on a solid body of empirical research that the authors analyze in detail. As a result, readers are exposed to the arguments of a legion of scientists whose work is little known. Naranjo and García demonstrate how entrenched the whitening ideal was in the racial thought of the Cuban white intelligentsia and how these ideas shaped the immigration policies of the colonial government and the Cuban state during the republic.

Racismo e inmigración and *Medicina y racismo en Cuba* are valuable also because they raise a number of intriguing questions that should stimulate further research into the intersections of race and science on the island.¹ Most of these questions revolve around the larger theme of how and

1. This research is now being conducted. For instance, Alejandra Bronfman, a doctoral candidate at Princeton, is writing a dissertation on the intersections of social science, race, and

why Cuban scientists selectively appropriated various scientific theories in order to analyze and modify their own society while dismissing others. For instance, why did most Cuban scientists subscribe to neo-Lamarckian notions of heredity in which environmental factors were assumed to play a significant role? And how did this influence, as noted by the authors (*Racismo*, p. 153), interact with the science of heredity produced in England, Germany, and the United States, particularly after the military occupation of the island by the United States from 1898 to 1902? Nancy Stepan claimed in her thoughtful book *The Hour of Eugenics*, “Racial traditions and self-perceptions, as well as U.S. influence, played their parts in turning Cuban initiatives in eugenics in a northern direction” (1991, 174). Would Naranjo and García agree with this interpretation?

Similar questions could be posed about the issue of *mestizaje* or racial mixing. Naranjo and García provide numerous examples in both books showing that many Cuban intellectuals consistently viewed *mestizaje* as a way to achieve racial “improvement”—that is, whitening. Yet a fair number of scientific studies had avowedly demonstrated, particularly in the United States, that racial mixing led to degeneration and “mongrelization.” Indeed, Latin American countries (including Cuba) were frequently held up as prime examples of racial decay due to the mixed nature of their populations. Why were these scientific findings rejected or ignored?

These valuable books by Naranjo and García would have benefited from a more active dialogue with the growing literature on race and nationhood in Latin America. This literature has emphasized the need to understand the formation of discourses of nationhood as contested processes in which those “below” have their own voices (on Cuba, see Ferrer 1995; Fernández Robaina 1990; Helg 1995). In *Medicina y racismo*, Naranjo and García analyze the campaign waged against the immigration of West Indians, who were brought to the island by large sugar companies as a cheap labor force in the 1910s and 1920s. Naranjo and García rightly assert that the sanitary, cultural, and social arguments voiced against these Afro-Caribbean immigrants were almost always based on belief in their inferiority. The authors’ thorough research of the leading scientific publications of the period allows them to capture and reconstruct the voices of Cuba’s most important white scientists and intellectuals. They agreed almost unanimously that Haitian and Jamaicans constituted “undesirable immigration” that would only contribute to the “Africanization” of the island. Even so, a few significant Afro-Cuban intellectuals challenged the racist premises on which the dominant rhetoric of exclusion was based (see Chomsky 1995; de la Fuente 1996).

law in Cuba entitled “Reforming Race in Cuba, 1902–1940.” Cuban historian Ricardo Quiza, of the Instituto de Historia de Cuba, is studying how discourses of hygiene and medicine influenced schools and educational policies in the early republic.

These observations are not intended to undermine the value and usefulness of these two books, however. *Racismo e inmigración* and *Medicina y racismo* open new areas of research and contribute significantly to the growing literature on race and *cubanidad*, a field in which some of the other books reviewed in this essay can be included, particularly Robin Moore's *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920–1940*. Whereas Naranjo and García examine discourses of race through the little-explored prism of science, Moore studies similar discourses from the equally neglected angle of popular music and other working-class forms of expression. Moore explains that his book analyzes the process through which "African-influenced musical forms and mass-mediated images of Afro Cubans first entered the national mainstream, and in their relation to changing conceptions of *cubanidad*" (p. 5).

Nationalizing Blackness accomplishes what it promises to do. The book concentrates on the 1920s and 1930s, and it focuses on so-called Afro Cubanismo, a cultural movement that turned African-influenced forms of expression into a central element in the representation of the Cuban nation. Moore's main interest is music and performers, but he also makes a systematic effort to analyze these cultural expressions in the larger context of sociopolitical conditions and the various discourses of Cubanness. Anyone interested in studying the contested and complex process of definition of *lo cubano* and the role played by different groups in the formation of a shared national identity cannot afford to ignore this book.

Nationalizing Blackness helps to fill several important gaps in Cuban historiography. As Moore notes, most of the available literature on the early republic is "largely focused on political, economic, and social issues" (p. 8). Cultural history has not been a central area of research, although a few valuable studies have been conducted, such as Jorge Ibarra's *Un análisis psicosocial del cubano* (1985). Moore's book also represents a significant contribution to the history of Cuban music. His careful research in a variety of Cuban archives and libraries allowed him to reconstruct the lives and activities of numerous popular performers whose very existence, much less their work, is barely known.

One of the major contributions of *Nationalizing Blackness* is the study of music as a site of social and racial conflict and the analysis of some of the ambiguities and contradictions that characterized Afro Cubanismo. Unlike scholars who have interpreted this movement as an elite maneuver to mask social and racial inequalities and tensions (Kutzinski 1993), Moore emphasizes Afro Cubanismo's "ambivalence" toward forms of expression with an African influence: "perceived Africanisms served as simultaneous sources of pride and embarrassment to the nation" (p. 220). This interpretation is persuasive. The incorporation of black working-class forms of cultural expression into national culture was neither unproblematic nor universal, but

it represented as Moore asserts, “a relatively progressive moment in Cuba’s history” (p. 219).

Moore’s concerns with race, culture, and the contested notions of Cubanness are shared by several of the contributors to *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*, edited by Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda. It could not be otherwise, for discourses of cubanidad cannot be understood without reference to the U.S. influence in Cuba’s cultural, economic, and political life throughout the twentieth century. Various social groups articulated their own responses to this influence, thus contributing to the constant reformulating of a national identity. One great merit of this volume is that it captures the voices and reactions of different groups of Afro-Cubans themselves, particularly literate urban Afro-Cubans who left written testimonies of their activities. The book also delves into the complex web of relationships existing between Afro-Cubans and African-Americans, a key area of study in which virtually everything remains to be done. Much like the other books included in this review, *Between Race and Empire* is a pioneering effort.

Afro-Cubans’ perceptions of their neighbor to the north varied, but they undoubtedly followed closely racial conditions in the United States and African-Americans’ organizational efforts and struggles. This point is evident in Carmen Montejo’s study of *Minerva*, a biweekly founded in 1888 and directed to “women of color.” *Minerva* published articles comparing conditions in the United States and Cuba, a common theme also in Gustavo Urrutia’s “Ideales de una raza,” a weekly section published by *Diario de la Marina* from 1928 to 1931 and analyzed by Rosalie Schwartz in *Between Race and Empire*.

Afro-Cuban intellectuals frequently cited the U.S. example to warn their white countrymen that racism could lead to growing separation between the racial groups and to patterns of race relations similar to those found in the United States. The association between U.S. imperialism and racism worked in contradictory ways, as co-editor Brock notes in her thoughtful introduction (p. 13). Some of them are explored in the essays contained in *Between Race and Empire*. The pairing could provide Afro-Cubans with a formidable ideological weapon. As some poems analyzed by Carmen Gómez García in “Cuban Social Poetry” demonstrate, such association allowed Afro-Cubans to fight racism at home in the name of a country largely defined in opposition to the United States. But as previous analysts have argued, members of the Cuban elites also used U.S. racism to pressure Afro-Cubans and to discourage the formation of racially defined forms of political mobilization.

On the other side of the Cuba-U.S. counterpoint, the confluence between imperialism and racism worked in equally complex ways. As David Hellwig points out in his pioneer study about black press reactions to U.S.

involvement in Cuba, African-Americans also used the Cuban case to question social conditions within the United States and to attack "the federal government's indifference to the plight of black citizens" (p. 75). An almost identical reaction is reported by Van Gosse in "The African-American Press Greets the Cuban Revolution." Yet the African-American press did not condemn U.S. imperialism consistently. Hellwig notes that most of the black press "applauded" the 1898 U.S. military intervention in Cuba because it gave African-American young men an opportunity "to affirm their loyalty to the nation" (p. 72). Similarly, Van Gosse asserts that African-American press interest in the Cuban Revolution "slowed to a trickle" after the first few months of 1959 (p. 275), despite growing U.S. opposition to the revolutionary government.

In the end, neither Afro-Cubans nor African-Americans nor any other people of African descent can be defined "just" in terms of their blackness, as Brock notes in quoting her perceptive grandmother (p. 6). Although race and the common experiences of discrimination helped create social and symbolic spaces that Afro-Cubans and African-Americans could share, conceptions of nationhood and the profound differences between the Cuban and U.S. racial orders filled those spaces with obstacles. Often these "encounters" ended up as mismatches. One example is Marcus Garvey's utter failure to attract a serious Afro-Cuban following, as analyzed by Tomás Fernández Robaina in his well-documented essay on Garveyism in Cuba. Another is the failure of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to become a significant "social, political or spiritual influence" in Cuba, Jualynne Dodson's theme in her excellent contribution to *Between Race and Empire*.

The complex question of negotiating identities in these encounters and misencounters is central to Nancy Mirabal's essay on Ybor City and Tampa, where Afro-Cubans had to share occupational, social, and geographical spaces with African-Americans in addition to white Cubans. Although the Cuban community, composed mainly of cigar workers, was not exempt from racial and other divisions, black and white Cubans created a community that was unique in the Jim Crow South, one with integrated workplaces, neighborhoods, and recreational facilities. But the end of the War of Independence and the U.S. intervention in Cuba eliminated what had previously been "a powerful tool for unification" (p. 56), forcing Cubans to define their status as either permanent immigrants or temporary exiles. As Mirabal contends, the decision to remain in Ybor City implied a remaking of their community. Given Cubans' own racial ideas and the nature of the host society, this remaking could not ignore issues of race. Afro-Cuban members of the previously integrated social and revolutionary clubs were forced to form their own clubs and mutual-aid societies, such as La Unión Martí-Maceo, which is still in existence. In the process, the "blackness" of Afro-Cubans in Ybor City was reinforced. In time, this separation

would facilitate growing links with the African-American community, as previous research on the Afro-Cuban community in Tampa has shown (Greenbaum 1985).

The Afro-Cuban workers who created La Unión Martí-Maceo in Tampa were building on a long tradition of similar organizations in Cuba. These organizations were studied by the late Carmen Montejo in *Sociedades de instrucción y recreo de pardos y morenos que existieron en Cuba colonial* and by Oilda Hevia in *El Directorio Central de las Sociedades Negras de Cuba*. These efforts to analyze Afro-Cubans' institutional life are serious and well-documented, but their lack of references to the literature on race, slavery, emancipation, and political conditions in the late-colonial period limit their significance. The two works overlap considerably. A third of Montejo's book is devoted to the Directorio, an organization created in 1887 to coordinate the activities of the numerous "societies of the colored race" existing in Cuba. By 1893 the Directorio claimed seventy-five *sociedades*.

According to Montejo and Hevia, creation of these societies was encouraged by the colonial government as nonpolitical forms of organization that would facilitate the conversion of the former African slaves into Spanish citizens, with legal rights increasingly similar to those of whites. As often happens, however, the results deviated considerably from the intentions of authorities. The *sociedades* became bases for Afro-Cuban political activism. They were used as centers of recreation and education but also as frameworks for articulating Afro-Cubans' demands and pressuring the government. Colonial authorities, in dire need of political support in the face of the threat of insurrection and independence, granted significant civil rights to Afro-Cubans in the 1880s and early 1890s. The societies and the Directorio, in turn, coordinated efforts to turn those abstract rights into realities.

Despite the image of unity and homogeneity that the existence of the Directorio might suggest, Montejo and Hevia concur that important cleavages existed within the so-called *clase de color*. To begin with, some societies enforced a color line that distinguished between *pardos* and *morenos*. Moreover, the leadership of the Directorio was composed of literate urban Afro-Cubans who did not hide their contempt for cultural forms and organizations of marked African influence. These dissimilar social experiences, which are only beginning to be understood, are crucial to explaining the varied forms of mobilization and participation attempted by Afro-Cubans in the late-colonial period and the early republic.

A body of scholarship is emerging on Afro-Cubans' various forms of mobilization in these years. Racially defined organizations, particularly the notorious Partido Independiente de Color, have been studied carefully (Helg 1995; Fernández Robaina 1990). Other forms of mobilization, such as participation in the complex webs of patronage through which republican

politics operated, in mainstream political parties, and in the labor movement, are being researched by a number of scholars (Scott 1995, 1998; Zeuske 1996; de la Fuente 1997, 1999).²

This growing interest in race, ideology, and politics in Cuba may have been sparked by “the special period.” What is beyond doubt is that such interest encompasses a variety of disciplines, periods, and approaches. The work currently being done by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and other scholars will modify our understanding of Cuba’s history and society considerably while contributing to the general field of studies of race and racism in the Americas. At the least, “race” in Cuba has now become a topic for discussion and debate.

2. Some of this work, produced by scholars based in Cuba and other countries, is contained in a forthcoming volume being edited by Fernando Martínez, Orlando García Martínez, and Rebecca Scott. Entitled *Espacios, silencios y los sentidos de la libertad*, the book will be published in Havana by Ediciones Unión. The papers in this volume were presented and debated in a conference held in Cienfuegos, Cuba, 5–7 Mar. 1998.

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